

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 21 *CutBank* 21

Article 12

Fall 1983

Gent

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Recommended Citation

DeMarinis, Rick (1983) "Gent," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 21 , Article 12.

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GENT

A year after my father shot himself my mother married a two-faced hardware salesman named Roger Trewly. In public, Roger Trewly smiled as if someone holding a gun on him had said, "Look natural, Roger." At home, though, he was usually cross and sullen and would rarely answer civilly if spoken to. He was a crack salesman and was once awarded a plaque engraved with the words: *Ace of Hand Held Tools*. There is a photograph that records the event. He is standing with the owner of the store, Mr. Fenwick, in front of a display of braces-and-bits, hammers, rip saws, and planes. Both men are smiling, but the difference in their smiles has stuck in my mind through the years. Mr. Fenwick is smiling like a man who has just been found naked in the girl's gym and isn't at all humiliated by it. There's a ferocious gleam in his eyes challenging anyone to file a complaint. He looks like a well-to-do madman, capable of anything, absolutely sure of everything. Roger Trewly is smiling as though he's just spilled boiling coffee in his lap at the church social. His face shines with desperate sweat and his begging eyes are fixed on Mr. Fenwick. If you cover the lower half of Roger Trewly's face with your thumb, you will see that his small, pale eyes have no smile in them at all. They have a puzzled, frightened cast, wide with adrenalin. They are the eyes of a man who has understood nothing of the world in his

thirty-five years. That anxious, kowtowing smile tries to hide this terrifying vertigo, but I don't think Roger Trewly fooled very many people. Mr. Fenwick, steely-eyed and successful, looks as though nothing had ever fooled him. When my father, who was a war hero, shot himself through the heart with his deer rifle, everyone was shocked. But when Roger Trewly jumped off the Mill Avenue bridge into the heavy rapids of the Far Cry River, no one in town was surprised, least of all my mother. "I saw it," she said. "I saw it coming."

Mother was only thirty-two years old the spring that Roger Trewly drowned himself, but four years of living with a terror-struck two-faced man had taken the bloom off her spirit. She didn't have gray hair yet, she didn't have wrinkled skin, she had not become bent or shaky or forgetful, but she acted like an older woman with not a whole lot left to live for. If you weren't a child, and could see things for what they were, you would have called her beautiful in spite of the lines and hollows of weariness that masked her true face. She was a petite, almost tiny woman with high, youthful breasts and her hair was the color of polished mahogany. She kept it long and she brushed it until it crackled with a suggestion of dark fire. She had large, widely spaced eyes, the gray-speckled green of imperfect emeralds, and a smile that made you want to jump up and do chores. My father, who was a large, powerful man, called her "doll" or "midge." He loved to pick her up in his strong arms and whirl her through the house whistling or singing, like a happy giant whose dreams had come true at last.

"Ma, you're so pretty!" my sister, LaDonna, said one bright summer afternoon in 1952. This was a little over a year after Roger Trewly killed himself. Mother was dressed up for the first time since the funeral. "Look, Jack!" LaDonna said, pulling me into mother's bedroom. "She looks like a princess!"

It was true. She was beautiful in her dark blue dress and white, high-heeled shoes and little "pillbox" hat. Her face had recovered its sharp-edged prettiness. She looked young and exotic. Her perfume struck me like a shocking announcement. We both put our arms around her and hugged her tight. "Princess! Princess!" we yelled, imprisoning her in our linked arms. I'd turned twelve years old that spring and shouldn't have been carrying on like that, but I was as overwhelmed by her as LaDonna was. She had come out of herself at last, like a butterfly out of its winter cocoon, and we clung to her as if we knew there was a real danger of her flying way from us. But she pried off our greedy arms and said, "Don't! You'll wrinkle me! I'm only going out on a date!"

She went out into the living room where the man was waiting. I hadn't realized that a stranger had entered the house. His name was Gent Mundy, the owner of Mundy's Old Times Creamery. LaDonna and I stood in front of mother like a double shield between her and this man, but we were only a nuisance and she sent us outside to play. And when Gent Mundy asked her to marry him several weeks later, we accepted the news like the condemned victims of a rigged jury.

Gent lived in a large, slate-gray house next to his creamery on the main east-west street of Far Cry. We were all invited there to have dinner with him. After cookies and coffee in the living room, he gave us a tour.

"This would be your room, Jackie," he said to me. 'My' room was on the second floor. It had a large dormer window that looked out on the parking lot of the creamery where all the milk trucks were kept when they were not making deliveries. The room was about twice as big as the one I had at home, and the walls had been freshly painted light blue. There was a 'new' smell in the room, and I realized then that all the furniture still had price tags on it.

Next he showed us the room he and mother would have. It was half again as big as my room, and the bed in it had a bright pink canopy. Mother sat on the bed and bounced lightly up and down twice. "This *is* something," she said, the thin light of greed sharpening her eyes. Gent sat next to her and the bed wheezed. The depression he made in the bed forced her to sag against him. She looked like a child next to

his bulk.

"I think she's warming up to the idea, kids," he said, winking nervously. He was bald, and the top of his head was turning pink in mottled patches. It looked like a map of Mars, the rosy, unknown continents floating in a white, fleshy sea. Gent Mundy was a tall man. He had a heavy torso, but his legs were painfully thin, almost spindly. His chest sloped out into a full, belt-straining stomach. His large head made his shoulders seem abnormally narrow. He had alert, pale blue eyes and a wide, friendly mouth that was fixed in a permanent half-smile, a smile warned off suddenly, as though by a cautionary second thought. He was an odd looking man, but he was friendly and alive and open to everything that was going on around him. He wasn't powerful and wild like my father, but he wasn't two-faced and careful like Roger Trewly, either.

He was especially attentive to mother. If she sighed, he would put his arm around her small waist as if to boost her morale. If she touched her nose before sneezing, he would quickly have his handkerchief ready. If she looked bored or disinterested, he would smoothly change to a livelier subject of conversation. If she began to rant at length about some ordinary injustice, he'd listen carefully to every word, and then, to prove he shared her concern, he'd repeat verbatim certain things she had said.

Some deep and fragile longing made him fall colossally in love with her. I almost winced to see it, even though I didn't understand what I was seeing or why it moved me to wince.

He made something of her name, Jade, and of her size. "Tiny perfect jewel," he once called her. "Jade, Jade, how I'd like to set you in gold and wear you on my finger!" When he said things like this, his eyes would get vague with tears.

LaDonna's prospective room was next to mine. Instead of fresh paint on the walls, it had new wallpaper—fields of miniature daisies against a light green background. "I had this done especially for you, honey," he told her, his voice low and secretive, as if it were a private matter between just the two of them.

Gent was forty-eight years old and had never been married. "I think I have a lot to offer you," he said, after the tour. We returned to the living room and sat down uneasily in the large, overstuffed chairs. Gent made some fresh coffee and poured each of us a cup. I picked up a National Geographic and thumbed through it. LaDonna picked up the silver cream pitcher. She brought it close to her face to study it. Mother held her steaming cup of coffee several inches from her lips,

blowing thoughtfully. Careful lines appeared on her forehead. A tall clock ticked patiently in the polished hallway. A black woman with low-slung breasts and dusty feet was talking to a white man in a sun helmet. I turned the page to an article about funeral customs in Sumatra. Gent was sweating now, and he mopped his head with his napkin. "Well, no," he said, as if agreeing to some unspoken criticism. "I'm no Casanova, I grant you that. I'm no Tyrone Power, that's for sure! But I am moderately well off. I can provide handsomely for all three of you. The milk business . . ." and here he seemed to be stumped for the precise words. A dreamy look came over his face and he smiled at the perplexity of the thing in his mind. ". . . is, is a *good* business." His face reddened, and his forehead was lacquered again with sweat.

Mother put the cup to her lips and drew a little hissing sound from it that made all three of us lean toward her. We were poor. Mother had a little pension, but it barely put food on the table and paid the rent. My father was out of work when he shot himself; and Roger Trewly, even though he was the 'Ace of Hand Held Tools,' never made enough to keep up with the bills.

Mother set the cup down and said something. Her back was straight and some untameable pride made the small muscles around her mouth rigid.

"What was that, Jade?" Gent said, leaning closer to her. "What was that your wonderful mother said, kids?"

LaDonna stood up. "It was yes," she said sternly. "Our wonderful mother said yes, she will be happy to marry you, Mr. Mundy."

LaDonna was like that. She saw things for what they were and she spoke her mind easily, and often with a sharp tongue. Though she was only eleven years old at the time, she had her future planned. She was going to be a scientist. She had no doubts about this. Her hero was Albert Einstein. A picture of the long-hair genius hung on her bedroom wall. She claimed to understand the general drift of his writings, if not all the math involved. She said that Einstein knew everything he would ever know when he was sixteen, he just hadn't found the words to put it in. She had an aggressive curiosity about nearly everything, and an ice-cold, relentless intelligence to back it

up. I always thought she was something special, one of the world's truly unique people, but her detached brilliance sometimes worried me.

When she was seven she made a jigsaw puzzle out of a frog, a salamander, and a cat-killed flicker. She spread out their innards on the backyard picnic table, trying to match them, organ for organ. The big and small differences fascinated her. Mother threw a fit when she saw the slimy, sun-pungent mess and called her Little Miss Frankenstein. But LaDonna was also affectionate and full of ordinary eleven-year-old ideas.

So, when LaDonna said yes for Mother, it was with such crisp authority that Gent clapped his hands together and said, "Oh, Jade, you don't know how happy you've made me! You'll never regret this, I promise!"

LaDonna and I liked Gent, though he was overly neat and too concerned with cleanliness. One day, while visiting our house, he began to fidget. We were all sitting at the kitchen table waiting for Mother to take a box cake out of the oven. Finally Gent pushed away from the table and found himself an apron. "I'll clean up a little while we're waiting," he said. He began to sponge-clean the sink and the counter next to it. Then he went after the greasy stove-top with Ajax and a hard-bristle brush. When he finished that, he knelt down and searched the floor for dust balls. There were no dust balls. Dust that found its way into the kitchen got mixed almost instantly with the haze of grease that covered everything. Mother wasn't a very good cook and preferred to fry most of our food. When she cooked for us, grease hung in the air like fog. Gent ran a finger along the base of the counter. He stood up then, a gummy gray wad stuck to his upturned finger, his half-smile bravely in place.

"Christ on a crutch, Gent," mother said. "You don't have to do that." She stood up and tried to yank loose his apron ties. But Gent danced nimbly out of reach.

"No, no, Jade," he said. "Honestly, I don't mind at all. In fact, I like to tidy up. I've been a bachelor for nearly half a century!" He scraped and scrubbed until the whole kitchen gleamed. Mother watched him from her place at the table. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke noisily through her teeth. After Gent finished mopping the kitchen floor, he found the vacuum cleaner and went to work on the living room carpet.

"No, no!" he yelled over the sucking roar, as if someone was trying to change his mind. "Let me do it! I don't mind a bit!"

He was wearing a suit. The apron had pink and white checks, with a ruffled trim. He had thrown his green, hand-painted tie over his left shoulder as if to keep it out of the way of the machine.

Mother got up and went outside. I watched her through the kitchen window. She crossed the backyard slowly and sat down at the picnic table. She lit another cigarette and stared into the hedge at the end of our property. A neighborhood cat jumped up on the table next to her, its vertical tail quivering, but Mother swept it away with a quick flash of her arm.

The night before Gent and Mother were to be married, Gent gave me a present. It was a dark blue suit with powerful gray stripes running through it. He also gave me a stiff, blue-white shirt and a shiny red tie with a picture of a trout painted on it. The trout had a red and white lure in its mouth. Big drops of water flew off its head like sweat.

“Christ God!” Mother said when she saw me in my new outfit. “Look at you, Jackie! It’s the president of the First National Bank himself!” She was honestly taken by my appearance. She pressed both hands flat against her stomach and laughed nervously. I went into her bedroom and looked at myself in the full-length mirror. I raised an eyebrow and frowned and curled my lips, one side of my mouth up, the other side down. I didn’t look bad. I felt I looked handsome in that ugly gangster way. “Say your prayers, sucker,” I snarled, imitating Edward G. Robinson.

Gent fixed us dinner that day. Mother had allowed the kitchen to get grimy again, but Gent cleaned it before he started cooking. He was a good cook. He made a standing rib roast, scalloped potatoes, and three kinds of vegetables blanketed in a rich yellow sauce. I wore my blue suit to the table. LaDonna had received a new dress for the occasion. Gent was very generous to us. I had found a ten dollar bill in the inside coat pocket of the suit, and LaDonna had found a five pinned to her skirts. I ate dinner like a steel robot, but still managed to get salad dressing on my tie and yellow sauce on my coat sleeve.

The wedding took place in a minister’s back office. It was stuffy and hot in there, and my blue suit made me feel sick, so I slipped out the door just as the minister was getting up a head of steam on the

subject of the good marriage and how easily it can jump the tracks and wreck itself in the rocky ravine of neglect. Good grooming, for instance, said the minister. Married folks tend to let themselves go as they gradually become familiar with one another. I saw Gent wink at mother when the minister said this, for Gent was nothing if not neat. And then, said the minister, there are the catfooted evils of spite, inattention, and the always misguided sense of independence. Amen, Doc, said Gent, under his breath.

I felt better out in the street. It was a cool day in early autumn. I walked to the closest drug store and bought a pack of cigarettes. The clerk didn't blink an eye. I guess I looked smoking-age in my blue suit, shirt and tie. I also bought a cigarette lighter that had the shape of a leaping fish. It looked pretty much like the trout that was jumping on my tie. The idea of my tie and cigarette lighter matching each other appealed to me.

I walked back to the church learning how to inhale. The smoke made me dizzy in an agreeable way. I knocked the ash off my cigarette several times so that I could use my fish-shaped lighter to light up again. Lighting up needed a style, and I studied myself in store windows trying to perfect one. When I reached the church, I sat down on the front steps and lit up again. Some kids ran by pointing at me and yelling "I'm gonna te-ell, I', gonna te-ell," but I blew some smoke at them and laughed suavely at their childishness.

After the wedding we went for a drive in the country in Gent's Buick Roadmaster, a black four-door sedan the size of a hearse. Gent parked next to an abandoned railroad depot. Mother and Gent walked down the old weedy rail-bed, and LaDonna and I explored the decaying brick depot. I actually found a set of ancient water-stained tickets that would have taken someone all the way to Chicago.

The windows of the depot were broken out and the floor was littered with a dank mulch of shattered glass and slimy leaves. I lit up a cigarette. LaDonna watched me with slowly widening eyes. I acted as though smoking was a trifle boring, as though smoking for us veterans was something to be endured fatalistically, like old wounds that would never quite heal.

I gave LaDonna a drag. Her brave curiosity wouldn't let her refuse. She drew a lungful of smoke. I could see that she wanted to choke it out, but she wouldn't let herself. "Give me one," she said, the words grating on her parched vocal cords. I gave her one and lit it for her. She inhaled again and blew the smoke furiously out her nose, her

teeth grinding together in a tough smile.

"L.S./ M.F.T.," I said, imitating the radio commercial.

"What?"

"Lucky strike means fine tobacco," I said.

She looked at the white cylinder in her hand. "Tastes like burning rubber," she said.

We walked out onto the crumbling platform where people from another generation caught trains for Chicago. We could see Mother and Gent hugging down the rail-bed in the shade of an old rusted-out water tower. They kissed. Gent in his dark brown suit looked like a top-heavy bear. He was so much taller than mother that he had to lean down and hunch his back as he gathered her in his arms. The kiss was long and awkward and Mother dropped her purse into the weeds. She tried to lean away from him to retrieve it, but Gent held her fast in his desperate arms, his legs spread for power. It looked like a bear had caught up with a Sunday picnicker. I took out my fish lighter and watched them through the orange flame.

My suit and tie made me look older, and smoking made me feel older. Feeling older widened my interests. I took a bunch of Gent's magazines up to my room once. I got them out of his office, which was a large panelled room next to the kitchen. Some of the magazines had full-color pictures of women wearing skimpy bathing suits. Others were of a more general interest. I read an article about the home life of stone age people. There were some drawings to go along with the article. The drawings showed short stubby women with furry tits tending a fire. They had faces only a zoo keeper could love. In the hazy distance, a group of short men without foreheads were carrying a huge wooly carcass of some kind. The caption under this drawing said: "The Backbone of Domestic Harmony is the Successful Hunt."

I set the magazine aside and looked at the pictures of the women in bathing suits. These were modern women—long-legged, smooth, with faces that were angelic and yet available. They seemed to radiate heat. The stone age men in the other magazine would have murdered entire forests full of wooly animals for a smile from one of those faces.

I'd been lying on top of my bed in my pajamas, but now I felt too restless and warm to go to sleep. I got up and put on my suit. I watched myself smoke cigarettes for a while in the mirror above my dresser. I looked good, I was developing style. I wished my neck wasn't so skinny. I cinched my red tie, drawing the loose shirt collar tighter around my throat.

It was late, but I went into their room anyway. I guess I wanted some adult company. I snapped on the overhead light. There was a great rolling commotion in the canopied bed. I sat down in the chair next to mother's vanity and lit a cigarette.

"Say, listen to this," I said, flipping open the magazine I had brought with me. "This story is about a day in the life of a linoleum cutter. It tells about this Stanley Wallach. He cuts linoleum twelve hours a day in Perth, Australia, and hopes to save enough money in twenty years to buy his own island. He's going to call it New Perth and crown himself king. King Stanley the First."

"Jackie," Mother said, sitting up in bed. "You shouldn't come barging into a bedroom like that. You're old enough to know better."

I felt suave in my suit. I put out my cigarette just so I could light another one. I wanted them to see my style. Gent was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me, his large pale head in his hands. He was in his shorts. I blew a recently perfected smoke ring toward them, winking.

"When did you start smoking?" Mother asked.

But I only crossed my legs and laughed in a sophisticated way, sort of tossing my head back and winking again, this time at the ceiling. I felt clever. I felt that I more or less had an adult's grasp of things.

"And there's this family," I continued, "who talk backasswards to each other, if you can swallow it. No one but themselves can get what they're saying. It's like a foreign country right in the middle of the neighborhood."

"Jack, old boy," said Gent, getting heavily to his feet. The lump in his long shorts swung as he stepped around the big bed. His bulky stomach rolled above his thin white legs. "Jack, you really ought to tap on a door before storming in like that."

I thought for a few seconds, then said, "Sklof, taht tuoba yrros."

"What?" Gent said.

"That's how they must do it," I said. "Talking backasswards."

Mother took a deep breath. It looked like she was about to smile. "Jackie . . ." she said.

I blew a fat doughnut straight up into the ceiling. "Okay, okay," I chuckled. "I can take a hint." I winked at them. Smoking had also given me a stylish chuckle, a husky little bark that trailed off into a world-weary wheeze. I stood up and yawned. I stubbed out my cigarette in their ashtray. "Guess I'll hit the old sackeroo," I said. "See you people in the morning."

I strolled slowly out of their room, as if the reluctance was theirs, not mine.

Money and a nice big house made all the difference to Mother. She now looked young and happy again. She had a lively bounce to her walk and she wore make-up every day. She bought herself a new dress on the first of every month and her collection of shoes outgrew her closet. She looked beautiful in the morning in her red silk duster and blue mules and she looked beautiful in the afternoon in her expensive dresses.

Gent was proud to have such a good-looking young woman for his wife and he made no secret of it. Her small size thrilled him, just as it had my father. But where my father would pick her up and dance her through the house, Gent seemed almost afraid to touch her, as if she were made of rare porcelain.

He would take us for Sunday car rides in the Roadmaster just to show her off to the town. Mother would sit in the front seat next to Gent with her skirts hiked up for comfort, and LaDonna and I would sit in the back, reading the comic section. The Roadmaster had a radio, and Mother would search the dial for music as we idled in second gear through the streets of Far Cry.

The town on the north side of the river was usually smoky because of the teepee-shaped chip burners the lumber mills used to get rid of waste. On the south side, the air had a sulphurous sting to it because of the paper mill. On Sundays, though, the air on both sides of the river was not so bad. We'd drive down the tree-lined streets of the north side, and then, if we felt like it, we'd cross the Mill Avenue bridge and cruise the wider, treeless streets of the south side. Sometimes Gent would pull over and park and we'd listen to the radio for a while. People on the sidewalks, looking into the car, would smile and nod as if to approve our way of killing Sunday.

Mother had a baby by Gent Mundy. It was a big baby and the delivery was an ordeal. It gave her milkleg and she had to stay in bed for nearly a month after she got home from the hospital. The head of the baby was so large that for a time the doctor thought it would not be able to pass through the birth canal. And when it did pass, it tore her badly. Gent felt terrible about this. I saw him once kneeling at her bed side, crying loudly, his face in his hands. But Mother healed quickly and soon the big, happy-dispositioned baby became the central attraction at our house.

They named him Spencer Ted. Spencer Ted looked like Gent, and Gent couldn't get over it. "The Mundy heir," he'd say, amazed. If I was in earshot, he'd get flustered and add, "No offense to you, Jack." But it didn't matter to me since no boy of thirteen cares much about inheriting a creamery. "My precious strapping fellow," Gent would coo to the big, round-headed baby, and if either LaDonna or I were nearby, he'd insist, "But, say, I love you kids too, just as if you were my own!"

All this didn't matter to LaDonna or me. We liked Gent because he was easy-going and generous. He gave us practically anything we wanted. LaDonna hinted for a microscope of her own, and Gent went right down to the Sears outlet and ordered an expensive binocular microscope complete with lab kit. I barely complained one day about having to ride my old, rusty Iver-Johnson bike, and the next afternoon after school I found a beautiful new Schwinn on the front porch, complete with basket, headlight, foptails, and horn.

It didn't matter to me or LaDonna that Gent loved Spencer Ted best because we loved the new baby, too. He was happy as a cabbage and cute in an odd sort of way. All babies are more or less cute, but Spencer Ted's cuteness wasn't baby-cuteness. It was the cuteness of joke postcards, where unlikely combinations are relied on to produce a humorous effect. Like a fish wearing a saddle and a cowboy in the saddle twirling a rope, or a poodle smoking a pipe and reading the newspaper. With Spencer Ted, it was a fringe of red hair around his ears, which made him look like an old scholar, and a round, tomato-red nose, which made him look like a seasoned drinker. He had deep-set, coal-black eyes that missed nothing, and radiantly pink ears that bloomed under his fringe of hair like roses.

Spencer Ted seemed as pleased with the brand new world as Gent was with his brand new heir. Often LaDonna and I would take Spencer Ted out for a walk in his stroller, and when we did this, LaDonna liked to pretend that we were his parents. It was a game that tickled her, and she would say things such as, "We must find a suitable nurse for our darling little man, dear." She would speak in a stagey voice and people near us would wink and chuckle, for we were only children ourselves.

Sometimes we would sit down on a park bench and LaDonna would hold Spencer Ted in her lap. Being held in a lap was a signal for him and he would begin turning his big round head impatiently, looking for a full breast. This made LaDonna nervous and she would give him his pacifier which only gentled him for a few seconds. He would spit the pacifier out, arch his back angrily, and then grind his soft, drunkard's face into LaDonna's milkless ribs.

"Mamma spank!" LaDonna once said, embarrassed by Spencer Ted's aggressive search for satisfaction, and Spencer Ted, arrested by her sharp, scolding voice, studied her like an old scholar studying an obscure text, his black eyes wide with alarm. LaDonna immediately regretted her tone. "Oh no, Spencey," she said. "Mamma would never spank *you*."

We always went to Grassy Lake on the Fourth of July. Grassy Lake was a recreational area for the people of Far Cry. There was a beach and several boat-launching ramps. In the late fall, old men would fish off the ramps with cane poles, but in the summer there were only bathers and boats at the lake.

Spencer Ted was almost one year old by the Fourth of July, and we took him up to the lake thinking that he'd be thrilled with the fast boats, the long expanse of deep blue water, and the evening fireworks. But he was cranky and balked at everything we tried to interest him in. He sat under the beach umbrella with Gent, fussy and critical, while LaDonna and I made sand castles and Mother swam.

I didn't know Mother could swim, but she swam like a young girl out to the diving platform which was about fifty yards from shore. LaDonna and I watched her, amazed. When she reached the platform, she pulled herself easily out of the water and stood on the

planks, shimmering with wet light. She took off her bathing cap, releasing her long shining hair. Then she found a sunny spot and lay down on her back.

The arch of her ribs, her nicely muscled legs, the graceful reach of her relaxed arms, and the mass of dark glossy hair pillowing her head and shoulders, made all of us gaze out across the water like the stranded victims of a shipwreck afflicted with thirst-caused visions. It was like a spell. Finally Gent said, in dreamy baby-talk, "Thaz you booly-full Mamma, Spencey," and Spencer Ted, recognizing at last the impassable gulf between him and Mother, released a ragged forlorn sob.

LaDonna and I turned our attention back to our sand castles. They weren't very elaborate and we didn't mind wrecking them as soon as we got them built. We erected a city full of sloppy skyscrapers. "Let's A-bomb it," LaDonna said.

I was the B-29, arms out, rumbling through the hot sky, radio chatter of the crewmen alive in my head, sighting in on the muddy skyline of our city. Then, as I approached it, I picked up speed, bomb bay doors open, crew tense, and I released the bomb, Fat Boy. I had to be Fat Boy then, and I fell on the city, back first, squashing it flat and LaDonna made the A-bomb noise, the rolling boom and bleak sigh of the high sweeping wind.

We did this several times, and then I dove into the lake to wash off the mud. I swam out toward the diving platform, thinking to join Mother, but when I looked up I saw that there was a man standing behind her. He was big and heavily muscled. He had black hair, bright as freshly laid tar. He lifted his arms and flexed. The biceps jumped impossibly tall with cords of angry veins, violet under the oiled skin. Then he put his hands on his hips and drew in his stomach until his rib cage arched over the unnatural hollow like an amphitheater. His thighs from his kneecaps to hips were thick with bands of visible muscle. He moved from one pose to another, finally relaxing, hands on hips at a cocky angle, a swashbuckler's smile on his tanned face. Mother glittered like booty at his feet. But she acted as though she didn't see him, or even know he was there.

I swam back to shore, and joined Gent and Spencer Ted under the umbrella. LaDonna was building another city. This one was futuristic, with tall spires and cylinders and oddly concave walls. I got a half dollar from Gent and bought a package of firecrackers—"ladyfingers"—and a package of "whistlers." I thought we could blow this city up with ordinary explosives, one building at a time. Gent and

Spencer Ted took a nap. Gent was lying flat on his back with a towel over his face and Spencer Ted was tucked in the crook of his arm. I was afraid the “whistlers” might wake them, but they didn’t.

After the city was wrecked, I watched Mother swim. She stroked the water like a professional channel swimmer, but she wasn’t swimming back to us. She was swimming parallel to shore, away from the platform. The muscle-man with the black hair was in the water too. He didn’t swim as gracefully as Mother. The water churned around him and his black hair whipped from side to side. Even so, he swam much faster than Mother and was soon even with her. They treaded water for a while, about one yard apart. I thought I could hear them talking. Then they swam back to the platform, side by side. He tried to match his stroke to hers, but it wasn’t easy for him. While she looked smooth and natural, he looked drugged.

He climbed out of the water first, then helped Mother. He pretended that she was too heavy for him and that she was pulling him off balance. He summersaulted over her into the water with a gigantic splash. Mother climbed up onto the platform, laughing. He joined her and then did a handstand. He began to walk around the perimeter of the platform on his hands while Mother shook out her hair. Mother leaned sharply to one side and then to the other, combing her hair with her fingers, while the muscle-man walked on his hands. It looked like some kind of crazy dance.

Gent and Spencer Ted were awake now and looking out across the water at Mother. Spencer Ted’s bald head looked like a smaller version of Gent’s. Spencer Ted lifted his fat white arm and pointed toward the diving platform. He moaned crankily and blew a fat spit bubble.

It was nearly evening. Soon the fireworks would begin.